



STATE OF IOWA

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DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
CHARLES J. KROGMEIER, DIRECTOR

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Focus on Disparities Produces Results in Woodbury

SIOUX CITY, Iowa—Department of Human Services Director Charles Krogmeier said Thursday (July 23) that a Woodbury County project to reduce a disproportionate number of Native American children in out-of-home placements is beginning to pay dividends.

In his first visit to Sioux City as DHS director, Krogmeier released new figures showing that the disparity involving native children is down more than a third compared to four years ago.

"We are squeezing bias out of the system and the trend is now going sharply in the right direction here in Woodbury County," Krogmeier said.

He challenged local leaders to keep making progress.

"This has been a thorny issue nationwide and many other efforts have failed, so I'm proud of our success. Even so, the disparity is too high. A child's race must have no bearing on government decisions in child welfare," he said.

Krogmeier singled out project leader Pat Penning, who is the top DHS official in northwest Iowa, and Native American leaders, particularly Frank LaMere, for their work in building trust between tribes and the DHS.

"Reducing racial disparities was one of the defining features of the DHS child welfare redesign of 2005, and I'm pleased that we're making progress. The challenge now is to build on this trust and keep the momentum going," Krogmeier said.

Native American children are still over-represented in child welfare.

There are about 900 native children in Woodbury County, which is 3.8 percent of all children in the county. Ninety-nine of those children —12.5 percent—were placed out of home in fiscal year 2008.

Thus, the share of native children in out-of-home placements was 3.2 times their share of the total population. The comparable disparity four years ago was much higher, at 5:1.

Penning said the key to success is to establish trust and a partnership with the native community, and to make sure that DHS workers are culturally competent. She established a special native-focused unit that consists of four caseworkers and two Native American tribal/family liaisons.

"Our goals for native children are the same as our goals for all children, and that is, we want them safe. In cases of abuse, we want the least-disruptive solution. In case of out-of-home placement, we want quick and safe reunification. The point is, we want to make sure that all of our child welfare decisions are made without bias," she said.

She said DHS workers attempt to quickly identify native heritage in child abuse cases, to make appropriate connections to tribes, and to offer culturally appropriate services. In addition,

her staff is aggressive in enforcing the Iowa Indian Child Welfare Act, which allows some child welfare cases to be the exclusive province of tribes if they request transfer of jurisdiction.

Another valuable asset, she said, has been the Four Directions Indian Center. In the past year, DHS has contracted with the center to offer native-focused parenting classes.

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